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THE CAUSES OF PRE-MILLENARIANISM

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The spread of pre-millennial and kindred views — by which we mean the scriptural thousand years of peace following the more or less early return of Christ in physical manifestation — is an unmistakable fact of present-day religious thinking. Some of the causes of the pre-millennial revival are incidental and can be dismissed in a word. For example, some pre-millenarianism is the after-effect of the powerful personality of Dwight L. Moody. Mr. Moody was one of the greatest personal forces for righteousness of his time; and some of the movements which resulted from his influence — like the Student Volunteer Movement — were at their beginning considerably colored by the Moody theology. Again, as a plain matter-of-fact, pre-millenarianism has made an appeal to not a few rich men who have given their money to carefully planned propaganda. Furthermore the Great War has raised in many minds the question as to whether the world is not indeed standing at Armageddon. The writer of this article found in France in the winter of 1917–18 a considerable group of American soldiers who had been led to study the Book of Revelation for light on the question as to when the war would end — many of the soldiers, be it said, fearing that it was written down in the Sacred Book that the war would end in February, 1918, before America could have her full chance.

But there are other and more serious grounds for pre-millenarianism. It is clear that we can adequately deal

with a religious phenomenon only by learning its causes. The biblical scholar answers the pre-millennial reasonings with crushing argument, but the pre-millennial view lives on. In fact, it has been with the Church from the beginning. More can be accomplished by asking why it exists and what it aims at and what are the secrets of its power than by any number of critical demolitions. A view which has to be demolished so often becomes something of a problem in the study of theological survivals.

The most obvious reason for the tenacity of pre-millennial views is, of course, the literalistic method of interpreting the Scriptures, or of taking the thought forms of one age as binding for all ages. The fault here is very largely with Christian teachers who may not think of themselves as at all literalistic. In spite of the fact that most of the trained men in the pulpits of the Church today accept the principles and methods of scientific Bible study, many of them make no application of these principles in their preaching. The preaching is pre-eminently practical rather than theological or even biblical. The Church for centuries has taken at least a partially literal view of the Book of Revelation — especially as regards a physical second coming of Christ. The working preacher has accepted the commonplaces of scientific biblical study — the documentary hypothesis as explaining the origin of various scriptural books, the rearrangement of scriptural dates which has come with more exact historical research, the theory of the synoptic problem. But busy as he is with swarms of details in his church-work he has never tried to get at the spiritual content of the various biblical apocalyptic conceptions. The actual result is that in the mind of his people — and sometimes in his own mind — these linger along with at least a semi-literalistic suggestiveness. At the other extreme is the minister who throws himself so heartily

into eschatological study that he makes even the thought of Jesus so eschatological as to leave Jesus no message of abiding and perennial worth. Apart from the deliverances of extremists, however, the biblical eschatology — especially of Jesus — should in these days be made the subject of the study of the working preacher; not to encounter present-day pre-millenarianism with critical refutations but to discover the spiritual content at which the pre-millenarian may be half-consciously aiming. To condemn the pre-millenarian movement as the activity of literally minded fanatics gets us nowhere. The only path to successful dealing with the movement is to show that the scientific handling of the Scriptures can preserve and even make more forceful the spiritual ideals at which Scripture apocalyptic aims.

There is nothing in the most rigid orthodoxy to forbid the recognition of eschatological factors in the thought of Jesus. Any Christological theory must make provision for the truth that Jesus lived the life of his time, and used the ideas of his day to set on high his revelation. The only real question of debate is as to the extent to which Jesus spoke in eschatological terms. Very few would today go as far as Schweitzer in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* and make the thought of Jesus eschatological and nothing else. Schweitzer—who, by the way, is not a German but an Alsatian and not a scholastic recluse but a devoted medical missionary — says himself that the only way to make a theory effective is to push it to its extreme development; and Schweitzer's work appears as if it had been carried through on this principle. The best balanced thought of today seems to incline to the view that the eschatological element in the Gospels is not at all exclusive or even determinative, but that on the other hand it is not to be cast aside as mere husk of a passing phase of Jewish thought. It contains in itself some features of lasting value.

To begin with, it is hardly fair to charge millennial views with being pessimistic. More than once the pre-millennialists' doctrine that the sooner things get hopelessly bad the sooner Christ will come, has been caricatured in the jibe, "The world is getting worse, thank the Lord!" And sometimes it does seem as if the holder of these views were willing to keep his hands off so that things might speedily get worse. But with regard to the mass of believers in the Lord's speedy coming in the flesh this is only caricature. Logically if things must get worse before they can be better, the correct attitude might be just to permit them to get worse. Practically, the pre-millennialist is a human being, quite as warm in his human contacts as the rest of us, and quite as likely to help a fellow human being in distress. One of the fiercest opponents of social service in America — an opponent because he believes that social service delays the quick consummation of evil which will make necessary our Lord's return — is himself a most successful superintendent of an organization of orphanages! But, logical inconsistency to one side, a pre-millennialist whose views are to be taken at all seriously cannot be called a pessimist. All the holders of biblical apocalyptic views have been alike in their belief in a good time coming. So great has been the practical effectiveness of this optimism that Dr. A. B. Davidson used to say that the great preachers from biblical times down to our day have been men of great expectations. Now there must be unremitting emphasis upon the futility of tying great expectations up with the details of Jewish or early church apocalyptic, but there must also be some way of holding fast the expectations. A scholar whose exegetical studies have dried up all his enthusiasms is not the best agent to counteract the fallacies in the pre-millennialist's new order just below the horizon. It will hardly suffice to lay stress on belief in the immediate, spiritual Christ as

contrasted with Christ-to-come, if the belief in the immediate Christ opens up no fountains of enthusiasm. It is an interesting fact that the non-millennialists who get along best with the most earnest pre-millenarians are those of manifestly intense religious experience. One religious leader of considerable prominence has succeeded beyond belief in winning the support of the most radical pre-millennialists, even though his avowed belief is itself radically against the belief of his friends. The secret is the leader's obviously genuine and enthusiastic devotion to the spirit of Christ.

Holders of apocalyptic views in all periods of the life of the Church have been believers in "other-worldliness." They have been profoundly dissatisfied with the earthly system of things. They have been able to see no way of remedy except by the total substitution of the present system by another through direct act of God himself. Their "other world" has not so much been a far-off heaven as a transformation of the present physical system. This view of the desperate nature of the existing system is greatly reënforced in times of widespread calamity or war. Now the advantage of the pre-millennialist comes partly out of his facing the facts of the present system. His optimism is the optimism of belief in a God mighty to deliver. There is, on the other hand, a good deal of optimism in the non-millennial camp that is hopelessly shallow. It consists just in looking the other way when the problem of evil is up. Suppose we glance at this question from the physical side. There is probably in every Christian's eschatology a belief that in the final consummation of things an ideal physical state will be the accompaniment of and setting for an ideal spiritual condition. The present physical state is far from ideal. All we can say of it is that it is capable of immense improvement but that improvement is within limits. Masses of mankind give themselves up to fatal-

ism because they feel the futility of trying to deal with the more elemental physical forces. While the improvement is being made, individuals die by the hundred thousand. The whole trend of the physical universe as we see it is toward ultimate dissolution. The doctrine of the divine immanence does not help us much if the divine is limited to the outworking of the present forces. In fact a doctrine of divine immanence which puts God in all things without giving us an adequate basis for trust in Him may make the cosmical situation more depressing. The sincere pre-millennialist has a solution for all this, no matter how crassly literalistic it may seem to us. The only way to meet the pre-millennialist is not merely to preach the vast change for the better which can be made in the present order of things but to emphasize anew the Christian conception that the Divine Force is not shut in to the workings of the present system. There is a sense in which the Church would benefit by a return to emphasis on the transcendence of God — transcendence conceived not indeed in the old sense of distance from and exaltation above earthly affairs, but transcendence thought of as existence beyond the limitations set by the forces which we see at work. As an illustration a little beside the mark, think of the new interest in and demand for belief in immortality created by the Great War. Men will not believe that this life is all, as they see the very flower of the youth of earth hurled to death by the million through devotion to a noble cause. So the non-millennialist will have to hold fast to an order above this or beyond it or here though invisible, if he is to deal with the problem with which the millennial views are trying to deal. But there is a vast difference between a view which would practically call for catastrophic annihilation of the present order and the substitution of another order, and a view which maintains that the seen does not exhaust the real, that

an enlarging grasp of reality might put the present system into its proper place as but one factor of divine activity. There can be no question that the practical ignoring of larger reaches of the divine power and wisdom and love by concentrating ourselves upon the immediate work-a-day task without much question as to anything beyond that task, makes for a revival of crude literalism in religious thinking.

The views against which we are contending, however, in their present-day forms concern themselves more with social than with physical conditions. Their pessimism is as to the power of man to achieve a worthy social result without the direct and miraculous power of the returning Christ. Here again the conventional church-attendant, and preacher, for that matter, is too easy-going in his optimism. The human mind has, if anything, wrought greater results in dealing with nature than with human nature. The race has gained a tolerable measure of control over famine and pestilence but has not yet learned to control itself. No form of social organization yet devised is certain of final success. We are indeed reaching out after world-democracy; but democracy rests not upon self-evident right of the people to rule but upon the fact that every other sort of government has failed. We turn to democracy as a last resort. But what if that fails? We raise this question just to suggest how much of a case can be made by those who are hopeless as to the present state of society. It is significant that the more radical type of socialists believe that the present social order can be improved only by a revolutionary overturning through a "general strike," or some such method. In their passionate enthusiasm for the immediate relief to come through sudden revolution the socialists have many points of similarity with the pre-millennialists: both bear witness to the deep-seated faults of the existing system, and both despair of slow-

moving processes of growth or evolution. Let us not make light of this despair. At the close of the most dreadful war in history, with some economists clamoring for our taking up the old industrial processes just where we dropped them, and some statesmen calling for a return to the old system of competitive and armed nationalism, it ought to be easy to understand the spirit which prompts the socialist to believe that the only hope is a revolution which will overthrow the system from below, or the pre-millennialist to cherish the hope that a divine intervention will overthrow the system from above.

One of the best checks to the spread of pre-millenarianism is an openness to the spirit of radical social reconstruction. The charge that the pre-millennialist is not interested in social reform is misleading. He is not interested simply because he has no faith in the methods proposed. For him the system is so bad that no agencies now at work can make substantial improvement. The author of this article is not by any means a socialist, but one does not have to be a socialist to see the very grave evils in the present system. The inequalities in the distribution of wealth alone bring the industrial order under most serious question. Now to confront the pre-millennialist who believes that the system is so evil that only God Himself can put it to rights and that by apocalyptic transformation, with the merely remedial program of many Christian leaders, is to trifle with the problem. Relief measures are good enough as mere relief, but the social order is in need of conversion. The Church must never allow herself to come to the place where she busies herself merely with schemes of social reorganization as such; but the Gospel is not fully preached until it produces the atmosphere out of which social transformation comes. To meet this situation by any sort of apology for the present order, or by reminding the people that by

gradual processes of evolution the world is getting better, is to play directly into the hands of the believers in the literal fulfilment of biblical apocalyptic. For the serious believer in such apocalyptic — and it is only the serious believer that we are considering — has at least faced the fact of the unideal nature of the present social order. The most far-reaching suggestion of social reconstruction now seriously before the attention of the world is the program of the British Labor party — a program which dares think of reconstruction in terms which embrace the whole world. It has been said that one element of strength in the British Labor party comes from the fact that the party has thrown open its larger assemblies and even its inner circles to the leaders of the churches in England. Be that as it may, there can be no gainsaying the increased power which will come to the churches of England from courageously facing the evils of the present industrial and international order and from determinedly proposing to try out thoroughgoing remedies. It is a matter for congratulation that the churches everywhere are beginning to see how deeply rooted are the faults of the world in which we live, and how heroic must be the measures of redemption. This is not to raise the cry of the alarmist. We are simply dealing with the problem of inadequate and distorted religious views; and we are trying to show that we must not allow such views to outdo us in seriousness of grasp on the world situation. Much of the so-called pessimism of apocalyptic views comes as a reaction from the smug complacency in the presence of social evils which sometimes passes as Christian optimism.

Another feature of apocalyptic views which has always made them attractive to many devout minds has been the place which they have assigned to God as the Judge of nations. The very fact that the believers in a literal fulfilment of apocalyptic prophecy say as much as they do

about God as Judge serves to keep in the forefront of religious thinking a moral and spiritual element of which we sometimes lose sight. The constant reference to law and force in abstract terms tends to make the ordinary, busy members of the Church think of the large national and international affairs as moving along in impersonal fashion. The thought of the leaders of the Church has long since clearly grasped the truth that a law is nothing in itself but a statement of method; that the God of the Scriptures can be conceived of as working in such manner that laws are but compendious descriptions of his never-ceasing deed. But the idea needs constant repetition and reënforcement. Men seldom lose their hold on the divine through sudden shock. Their faith rather wears out or oozes away because of the constant pressure of apparently impersonal and opaque facts. The very fact that the literalist says so much about God — even though he occasionally oversteps the limits of good taste in talking familiarly, not to say glibly, about the plans of God — gives him an advantage as a propagandist. He seems to be more religious than those who talk of national evils as coming naturally to judgment in their fruit. Especially is this true in a day which thinks of national and international welfare largely in utilitarian terms. The field of international ethics has never been very clearly thought through, but in that field we did not, until the outbreak of the Great War, hear much of righteousness and justice and judgment to come. The pulpit has, if anything, neglected its opportunity to emphasize and reëmphasize historical processes as subject to the judgment of a moral God. The danger of cant here is very great, but there is also the other and even greater danger of encouraging impersonalism through failure to teach that national courses are manifestations of the purposes and judgments of the Divine. The days just ahead of us ought to be

quite favorable to the preaching of God as judge of the nations without resort to biblical literalism. The Great War has been in its larger outcome terribly suggestive of the inevitability of Divine Judgment, if we do not limit the judgment merely to one nation. All nations have worked under competitive and imperialistic ambitions, which have brought all to share in greater or less degree the disastrous fruit of such ambitions. It goes without saying, of course, that in dealing with the conception of God as Judge of nations the literalism of the pre-millenarian makes his work dreadfully barren. The type of mind that can regard the present world-crisis so largely from the point of view of the return of the Jews to Palestine shows at once the inadequacies of literalism. Professor F. C. Burkitt has drawn a very interesting parallel between the judgment scene in the Book of Enoch and the judgment picture in Matthew 25. The parallelism is so exact as to suggest irresistibly the dependence of Matthew upon Enoch, and yet the difference is just such as we should inevitably attribute to Jesus. The setting — the nations of the earth assembled for judgment — is the same in both passages. The difference is that Jesus has introduced the distinctively human test as the standard of judgment. It is amazing that the humanity of the test of Jesus as reported in Matthew 25 has not given the impulse to greater spiritualization of pre-millenarian views.

In still another respect the apocalyptic literalist has a tactical advantage in his preaching. He appeals to the human craving for the dramatic in his predictions of crisis after crisis. Here again the holder of the sounder view has been placed needlessly at disadvantage. Not that he need pay overmuch attention to the instinct for the dramatic, but he should pay more heed to the significance of crisis. In the actual world events do move toward a focus, they do show crossings and recrossings;

and a cross-roads in events may be just as important historically as is an actual cross-roads geographically. Nor is this out of harmony with the modern idea of evolution. In evolution events do not always move at the same rate of speed. A long, gradual process of growth may be crowned with a quick harvest-time, which explains the growth and points toward a larger future. There is no reason why a sound doctrine of the imminence of God may not be combined with a sound doctrine of the immanence of God. The pre-millennialist reaps an advantage from his belief that something may happen soon. On the other hand, the attitude of adjustment to a slow-moving process plodding along at a uniform rate begets patience indeed, but not the alert-mindedness which holds all the powers in readiness for the quick whitening of the harvest. This alertness, after all, is the true patience. In historic processes doors open — and then close; roads cross each other — or turn corners; trees of good or evil come to sudden fruitage. Happy the minister who can keep alive this reasonable sense of expectancy! Psychologically he wields an instrument with which to ward off from his people the temptations to the theatric and spectacular in literal apocalyptic. And the advantage is more than psychological. For understanding the movement of divine revelation hardly anything is more important than the illumination which may burst forth at times of crisis. Just as crisis is profoundly instructive in individual experience, so is it in the larger life of society. We keep our intellectual balance by reminding ourselves that a crisis which is not preceded by long periods of preparation is not likely to lead to deep insight; but we keep alive our sense of expectancy by remembering that a slowly working force will sooner or later rush toward a quick revelation of its inner meaning. There is no reason why the pre-millenarian should be allowed a monopoly of the interesting in his preaching.

Finally, there is something very compelling and attractive in the apocalyptic idea of Christ as ruler. It will be remembered that Schweitzer made this view of Christ as ruler one of the essential and permanent contributions of apocalyptic to the thought of the Church. Schweitzer insists that the picture of Jesus as teacher is not true to the fact of the oldest presentation. Jesus was not contemplative but active. And yet there is not after all such a great contradiction between the view of Jesus as teacher and that of Jesus as ruler. The Church has maintained from the beginning that Jesus taught not as a formal instructor but as a leader forcing men to learn the doctrine by doing the will of God.

For the rest, the picture of Christ as working with an apocalyptic plan is not without attractiveness. If in such a picture Christ loses something of amiability, he gains in force. He appears really as compelling events. The modern believer in non-resistance would have great difficulty in claiming Christ for non-resistance in the Marcan picture as interpreted by the scientific student of apocalyptic literature. In such interpretations the Christ is not a passive watcher of events. He seeks to force events. In his thought the Kingdom cannot come till the people are roused to reach forth for it. Hence the insistent call for repentance. Now it is entirely clear that the preacher can use this conception of the Christ — in so far as he is convinced of its truth — without subscribing to the literalistic claim.

It may be objected by some that this article deals with the pre-millennialist all too seriously, in face of the absurdities to which the literalists give themselves. Some critics insist that such absurdities can be met only by ridicule. But one who, like the writer, has seen pre-millennialists rushing through mission-fields in haste to visit all the towns before the imminent coming of the Lord, need not be told to what lengths literalism can lead

some minds. This article, however, is not written for fanatics, but rather for the serious mind who really feels that the advantage in spiritual content is with the literal acceptance of apocalyptic prophecy. Literalism of this sort must be resolutely set aside; but it is possible to set it aside without at the same time abandoning the essential spirit and aim of those who taught in apocalyptic terms some eternal truths about the presence of God in human history. The old seers spoke in apocalyptic terms because there were in their day no other terms to use. With the coming of a new day the literal apocalyptic was outdated, but the spiritual ideals of the apocalyptic still have compelling power. It is a mistake to ignore or underestimate spiritual factors because of the excesses or aberrations of literalistic interpreters of such factors.